In the 2016 Democratic Primary, Senator Bernie Sanders and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton each campaigned to secure their spot as the Democratic candidate in the 2016 presidential election. Clinton’s experience as a woman campaigning for a prominent position was marked by sexist criticisms; such women “tend to be pornified, degraded, diminished, and treated differently” (Wilz, 2016: 358). In particular, Clinton was the target of sexist critiques from a segment of Sanders supporters termed “Bernie Bros” in Meyer’s (2016) article in The Atlantic.

Characterized as middle-class, white males (Meyer, 2016), the Bernie Bros were known for their vitriolic online content skewering Clinton for her sex and gender identity.

The Facebook group Bernie Sanders Dank Meme Stash (BSDMS) was a well-known platform for circulating memes promoting the senator’s campaign during the primary. However, the lack of connection to the official campaign and absence of oversight by moderators (Penney, 2017, p. 415) allowed the promotion of sexist content, mostly lambasting Clinton for simply being a woman. While the sexist content was conveyed via image macros and supposedly humorous content, such messages ultimately uphold the existing patriarchal hierarchy and imply that a woman could never be as qualified as a male to hold a position of power. Some members of BSDMS opposed overtly sexist content via comments, attempting to police messages produced and shared by the group; however, the group was far from united in their stance regarding both overt and implicit sexist humor, as many members argued that the humorous nature of the memes excused sexist content or that Clinton, because of her actions during the Democratic Primary, deserved any criticism she received, sexist or otherwise. However, the sexist content produced and defended by members of BSDMS has no exclusive relationship to Sanders’ campaign or his supporters, but is instead indicative of larger online trends. Furthermore, such online trends are frequently reflective of existing cultural beliefs and norms, placing the responsibility for such content on the United States’ devaluation of women rather than Sanders’ supporters or Bernie Bros alone.

**Literature Review**

Scholars originally believed that the Internet would free users from racial identities and racism (Daniels, 2013, p. 695). However, racism exists on the Internet, manifesting in both old and new manners (Daniels, 2013, p. 696). In addition, globalization has prompted the development of racial communities online, including those in which white users connect (Daniels, 2013, p. 699). Kendall (2000) conducted a study of such an environment, a multi-user dungeon (MUD) called BlueSky, in which primarily middle-class, white, male, heterosexuals gather to chat on a daily basis (p. 258). Users in this space, even female users, distanced themselves from femininity and supported hegemonic masculinity by engaging in “jokes regarding women’s status as sexual objects” (Kendall, 2000, p. 264). The men in the group connected by creating “sexual and gender narratives” that worked to develop their masculine identities (Kendall, 2000, p. 265). In such an environment, not only whiteness, but white masculinity, is performed and celebrated.

The valuation of the white male in the United States is linked to white nationalism which, Kusz (2007) argued, was catapulted into mainstream American culture by the events of September 11,
Following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, the “White everyman” was portrayed as the embodiment of American heroism, while critics of such an image were silenced for fear of being considered “unpatriotic, soft, politically correct... or, even... siding with the terrorists” (Kusz, 2007, p. 78). Therefore, the elevated position of the white male was and is incontestable by marginalized demographics, or even white males who disagree with such a hierarchy.

Hegemonic masculinity, as defined by Kendall (2000), is “the configuration of gender practices which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” and represents “the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p. 260). The elevation of white masculinity, however, works not only to subordinate women, but also men of color. People of color are convenient scapegoats for issues faced by white men. For instance, the diminishing number of IT jobs led to the organization of several movements that blamed offshore and H1-B workers for occupying jobs that were formerly held by Americans – despite the fact that 70% “of [businesses] that moved stayed within US borders” (Rodino-Colocino, 2012, p. 27). The opposition to H1-B and offshore workers placed the “blame for material and cultural upheavals” squarely on nonwhite workers, without consideration of other economic factors (Rodino-Colocino, 2012, p. 25).

Few men actively embody hegemonic masculinity. However, all men reap the benefits of the social elevation of men over women (Kendall, 2000, pp. 260-261). Coupled with what Wiegman (1999) termed “liberal whiteness,” or “a color-blind moral sameness” that posits a post-racial position which disregards existing systemic inequalities, this leads to the dismissal of the experiences of women and people of color (p. 121). Although the typical citizen is not actively involved in the oppression of marginalized populations, white supremacy is a product of entrenched systems of power (Wiegman, 1999, pp. 142-143). By not actively contesting the social hierarchy that positions men, particularly white men, over women and people of color, white men implicitly support the system of inequality.

Sexism is also evident in online political discourse. As Wilz (2016) related, “Whenever women seek any space traditionally held by a man...they tend to be pornified, degraded, diminished, and treated differently” (p. 358). When Hillary Clinton campaigned to become the Democratic candidate for president in 2016, she faced a storm of sexist criticism. Certain supporters of Bernie Sanders, who ran against Clinton, were dubbed “Bernie Bros” by the media, highlighting their sexism against Clinton and her supporters. The term was coined by Meyer (2016) in his Atlantic article “Here Comes the Berniebro.” Meyer (2016) related, “The Berniebro is male...very male” as well as “white; well-educated; [and] middle-class.” The term was quickly adopted by other media outlets. Albrecht (2017) described the Bernie Bro as defined by his gender and young age and who “straddled or crossed the line into a misogynist hatred” of Clinton (p. 509). The Bernie Bros were accused of “frequently misogynist and occasionally obscene” Internet activity, all intent on criticizing Clinton as being “too old, too compromised, and/or too much of a card-carrying female to be president” (Hampson, 2016). Bernie Bros were seen as opposing Clinton based primarily – if not solely – on her sex and gender identity.

While the Bernie Bros were not an official part of the Sanders campaign, their posts in “unofficial” Sanders support groups like Sanders for President on Reddit (Penney, 2017, p. 418)
and Bernie Sanders Dank Meme Stash on Facebook reflected negatively on the senator’s campaign. The attention garnered by the Bernie Bros posts may in part have been due to the Sanders campaign’s extensive use of social media (Penney, 2017, p. 409). Citizen interaction in Sanders’ campaign involved not only the production of online content such as videos and memes, but also the wide circulation of such content (Penney, 2017, p. 407). While supporter-authored web content served to raise awareness about the senator and his campaign, such unofficial groups “pose[d] risks...when ceding control to individual users who may or may not follow desired social and behavioral norms” (Penney, 2017, p. 405). The activities of the Bernie Bros led to a flurry of media criticism of the senator and his supporters (Penney, 2017, p. 418).

Some, however, felt that the Bernie Bro trope was an unfair characterization of Sanders’ supporters. Meyer (2015), in the article in which he coined the term, related that “The Berniebro is not every Bernie Sanders supporter.” Despite this disclaimer, the term “became a generic phrase used to describe all who advocate for Sanders” (Wilz, 2016, p. 359). Hampson (2016) related that the Bernie Bro is “by all accounts, a small minority of Sanders’ estimated online force of 9 million.” Others took stronger positions on the issue. Greenwald (2016) argued that the Bernie Bro narrative was a “potent political tactic – and a journalistic disgrace.” Greenwald (2016) disparaged the tactics used by the supposedly pro-Clinton news outlets, claiming that such publications used the Bernie Bro narrative to detract from Clinton’s “policy views, funding, and political history.” While most admitted the existence of the Bernie Bro, Hess (2016b) argued that “as the meme gained momentum, some...stopped bothering to marshal any kind of evidence,” and Wilz (2016) asserted that sexist attacks against Clinton had more to do with the culture of the Internet than Sanders’ supporters or his campaign.

Communicating via the Internet has indeed created a unique culture that shares similarities with the type of content Bernie Bros are accused of producing and sharing. As Ceferin and Meznar (2014) related, Internet commenting is “often misused to spread hate speech” (p. 478). The “interactivity, anonymity, and perceived credibility” of the Internet makes it a powerful tool for spreading messages, but this tool is often repurposed to share “bias and hate speech” (Erjavec and Kovacic, 2012, p. 900). Individuals communicating via the Internet may experience “deindividuation,” which Reagle (2015a) explained as “a loss of a sense of self and social norms” (p. 94), leading users to interact online in ways they would never consider face-to-face. This deindividuation leads to an increase in aggression, which is “socially inhibited” in face-to-face communication and mass media, but is “not often regulated” online (Laineste, 2013, p. 30). This aggression is often directed against women or other marginalized communities. In fact, as Reagle (2015a) explained, “…sexually violent comments, especially toward women, are an established genre of comment” (p. 106). Thus, the sexist and vitriolic content allegedly spread by Bernie Bros is in keeping with trends of communication via the Internet in general, rather than Sanders supporters specifically.

There is also some contention regarding the identity of the supposed Sanders supporters contributing sexist content to pro-Sanders groups. For instance, John Mattes, the administrator of the “San Diego for Bernie Sanders” page on Facebook, started noticing an increase in members not affiliated with California joining the page and sharing anti-Hillary content during June 2016 (Shane, 2017). Among the outlandish criticisms shared by these users were links to articles that asserted “Clinton had murdered her political opponents and used body doubles” (Grim &
Cherkis, 2017). When Mattes attempted to locate the domain registrations of these sites, he noticed that 40% of these sites originated in Eastern Europe (Grim & Cherkis, 2017). In fact, Facebook officials later deleted hundreds of accounts that appeared to have been created by “a Russian company linked to the Kremlin” which were used to buy divisive advertisements in an attempt to sway the results of the presidential election (Shane, 2017). Hector Sigala, the representative of the Sanders campaign tasked with investigating the fake news sites, felt that most of the users posting the links were “just…average internet trolls” after he found that many of the individuals were also affiliated with 4chan, “a gathering place for the alt-right, white nationalists and plain old nihilists” (Grim & Cherkis, 2017). Trolls, as Phillips (2015) explained, like “to disrupt stupid conversations on the Internet” and have two rules: “nothing should be taken seriously, and if it exists, there is porn of it” (p. 1). Trolling does appear to be primarily “the province of men” (Reagle, 2015a, p. 98) and can often take the form of sexism or hate speech. Thus, the characteristics of trolls share many similarities with the supposed Bernie Bros. Regardless of whether the posters of the most anti-Clinton content were part of a concerted Eastern European effort to sway the results of the election or just regular Internet trolls, it seems evident that at least some of the anti-Clinton content attributed to Sanders supporters was produced and shared by users with ulterior motives.

Regardless of the proportion of Sanders supporters who could accurately be termed Bernie Bros, Clinton certainly faced sexist criticism – both online and off. Many sexist critiques online were conveyed via highly adaptable and shareable memes. Memes, in the contemporary sense, are “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance…that were created with awareness of each other…and…were circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (Shifman, 2014, p. 8, her emphasis). The “success” of a meme depends on its cultural relevance and its “play on familiar visual or textual concepts” (Vie, 2014). Some successful memes, most notably the “Idiot Nerd Girl” meme, promote sexist messages. For instance, the “Idiot Nerd Girl” meme features a teen girl with thick-rimmed glasses and the word “NERD” written on her hand. The original photo (left) was then modified to an advice animal macro image (right) on September 12, 2010, with the caption “Self-Proclaimed title of “Nerd”/ What is World of Warcraft?” (“Idiot Nerd Girl,” 2017).
The message of the “Idiot Nerd Girl” meme is that “young girls pretend to be interested in aspects of geek subculture in order to attract men” (Feminspire, 2012). As Feminspire (2012) related, the prevalence of this meme is indicative of an increasing focus on female participants in a male-dominated culture. Thus, there is already a precedent for sexist content in memes, and sexism was similarly conveyed through memes that focused on Clinton’s gender identity as a marker of her ability (or lack of ability) to lead the United States.

One of the primary sites for the circulation of memes regarding Bernie Sanders during the 2016 primary was the Facebook group Bernie Sanders Dank Meme Stash (BSDMS). According to KnowYourMeme (2016), BSDMS is “devoted to creating and distributing memes, generally image macros and exploitables in support of Bernie Sanders.” The group gained notoriety during the election for “producing memes…at a high rate of mutation” (“Bernie Sanders Dank Meme Stash,” 2016). College students Will Dowd and Sean Walsh created the group in early October 2015 (“Bernie Sanders Dank Meme Stash,” 2016), and the group soon grew to over 300,000 supporters (Dewey, 2016). Dowd’s vision for the group was an “online free-for-all” in which members could post with “very little monitoring or oversight” (Penney, 2017, p. 415). However, this “lax” model meant that the content of the memes could easily move “off message” (Penney, 2017, p. 415). With little to no moderation from Dowd or other group administrators, BSDMS was an ideal environment to both promote Sanders and criticize Clinton – regardless of whether the critique focused on policy issues or promoted sexist ideals.

**Methodology**

I collected memes from July 2016 – several months before Meyer’s (2016) “Here Comes the Berniebro” article was published in The Atlantic – through the time of the study, November 2017. In my review of memes shared as photos on the BSDMS group page, I looked specifically for memes that might qualify as hate speech. Hate speech is “an expression that is abusive, insulting, intimidating, harassing and/or inciting violence, hatred, or discrimination” and is typically targeted at an individual due to her/his “race, ethnic origin, religion” (Erjavec and Kovacic, 2012, p. 900) or, in this case, Clinton’s gender. In order to be classified as “hate speech,” such communication “must be directed against identifiable groups (or individuals belonging to such a group) which are defined by an attribute that merits special protections” (Reed, 2009, p. 79). In most cases, groups that require special protection are those for whom “the incitement of hatred…has historically led to…oppression” (Reed, 2009, p. 79). Thus, any memes I located that attacked Clinton primarily based on her gender (i.e. sexist language, criticisms of appearance or sexual performance) I classified as “Overtly Sexist.” Those memes that did not openly criticize Clinton’s gender but made jokes that ultimately implicated her gender as the source of her failure (to be “cool,” or “informed”) I classified as “Implicitly Sexist.”

Memes also needed to be established as a trend in order to be included. Memes are a collection of digital items ((Shifman, 2014: 8), so if sexist content was contained in one image and not used again (on BSDMS or in KnowYourMeme) it was excluded from the study. I concluded the study having located three overtly sexist memes and one meme that contained implicitly sexist content – albeit the meme was very popular and had thousands of iterations.
Having divided the memes into “Overtly Sexist” and “Implicitly Sexist” categories, I then examined BSDMS group members’ responses to these memes to attempt to identify trends. As Reagle (2015b) related, comment (as a genre) “can inform (via reviews), improve (via feedback), manipulate (via fakes), alienate (via hate), shape (via social comparison), and perplex” (p. 3). While it was impossible to determine whether the meme’s original poster was a sincere Sanders supporter or a troll, the comments provided an understanding of the group’s general response. I investigated the comments on each meme to determine in what way comments were being applied by users and to what effect. In this way I was able to gauge the group’s overall support for sexist content.

When conducting research via social media, it is also necessary to consider ethics regarding individuals’ privacy. Research that is exempt from the need for Institutional Review Board approval involves the “observation of public behavior” (Moreno et al., 2013, p. 2). Legally, courts have determined that a person posting content on social media “has no reasonable expectation to privacy,” and thus the content is determined to be publicly available (Moreno et al., 2013, p. 3). Regardless, when conducting research via social media, it is important to assure that “information is identifiable, but not private; and information gathering requires no interaction with the person who posted it online” (Moreno et al., 2013, p. 2). The only information available to me from the BSDMS page was posters’ names, which certainly constitute identifiable information, but not private. In addition, I did not interact with any of the subjects of my research, but merely recorded their previously posted responses to content.

Exempt research must also avoid recording information about subjects “in such a manner that subjects can be identified either directly or through the identifiers linked to the subjects” that could in anyway “place the subjects at risk of criminal or civic liability…[or damage] the subjects’ financial standing, employability, or reputation” (Moreno et al., 2013, p. 2). Accordingly, I assigned subjects aliases such as Commenter A, Commenter B, etc. This will protect subjects from being identified and thus will prevent any negative consequences from occurring due to the use of their comments in this research.

Results

From July 2016-November 2017, there were several overtly sexist memes as well as many that implied sexist criticisms against Clinton. An examination of the comments section of each revealed that, while overtly sexist memes tended to draw criticism from members of BSDMS, implicitly sexist memes attracted little attention or resistance from members. Overtly sexist memes featured sexist language, criticized Clinton based on her appearance, or commented on her husband’s sexual infidelities. The implicitly sexist meme I located focused on Clinton’s lack of cultural knowledge, similarly to the “Idiot Nerd Girl” meme explained above.

Overtly Sexist Memes

Monica Lewinsky. Monica Lewinsky began as an unpaid intern in the White House during Bill Clinton’s presidency. On August 17, 1998, President Clinton admitted that he and Lewinsky had an “inappropriate relationship,” the fallout from which eventually resulted in Clinton’s impeachment (“A Chronology,” 1998). Hillary Clinton continued to campaign for her husband
throughout the scandal and ultimately remained in a relationship with him. During the 2016 presidential election, Clinton’s Republican opponent Donald Trump criticized Clinton about her husband’s affairs and her manner of responding to them (Twohey, 2016).

A similar sentiment is expressed in memes regarding Lewinsky which, while featuring an image of Lewinsky, target Clinton with the message that Clinton was unable to satisfy her husband. For instance, the meme to the right (Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 2 August 2016) features an image of Lewinsky urging voters to support Lewinsky over Clinton because Lewinsky is able to get the “job” done, a reference to the oral sex she allegedly performed on President Clinton. The meme communicates the message that because Clinton could not perform her duties as a wife, she cannot perform the duties of the presidency.

BSDMS members offered mixed reactions to the meme. One member argued that the meme is “undank,” and, when pressed, related that “theres [sic] actual arguments we could be making rather than legitimizing the ‘bernie bro’ stereotype” (Commenter V, 2016). This comment demonstrates the awareness of this group member that not only is the meme sexist, but it damages the ultimate goal of BSDMS, which is to support Senator Sanders. By creating and disseminating sexist content, Commenter V argued, some members of BSDMS are providing Sanders’ detractors with media they can use to delegitimize Sanders supporters. Others agreed that the meme is “tasteless” (Commenter W, 2016), but provided no further justification for their reaction.

Other iterations of this meme provoked similar responses. The example below, featuring Lewinsky’s picture with the words “Looks like Hillary blew it” (Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 12 September 2016) conveyed a message consistent with other memes featuring Lewinsky. Commenter X (2016) outlined the division between Sanders supporters’ responses to sexist criticisms of Clinton in the comment, “Bernie supporters: RESPECT WOMEN…Also Bernie supporters: HAHA HILLARY COULDN’T GIVE HEAD AS GOOD AS MONICA.” Commenter X (2016) went on to urge members to make up their minds on the issue, exclaiming “DO WE DO THE SEXIST JOKES OR DOES BERNIE DISAPPROVE OF THEM.” Commenter X’s comment articulated the two contrasting approaches to sexism evinced by members of BSDMS.

**Haggard Hillary.** The “Haggard Hillary” meme features a tired-looking Hillary Clinton image macro with overlaid text. While this meme is not one of the many featured in the crowdsourced KnowYourMeme repository, it appears several times in the BSDMS group. The sexism inherent in this meme is the criticism levied against Clinton for her appearance – a criticism that is not
often raised against male candidates. As Citron (2013) related, “being a woman raises one’s risk of cyberharassment” (p. 12). The degradation of Clinton for her physical appearance in this meme is indicative of this unfair treatment.

Comments on one iteration of the “Haggard Hillary” meme (shown at left) seem to explain the group members’ attitudes toward Clinton. This iteration (Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 17 November 2016) implied that Clinton is aging rapidly due to her need to ingest young blood. The comments criticized Clinton’s appearance, which, again, is a criticism primarily leveled at females. One user, in protest of the meme’s contents, remarked, “Bernie supporters used to be good people” (Commenter T, 2016), to which another group member responded, “[we] used to, but we’ve been fucked over and over and over again…” (Commenter U, 2016). Tellingly, the first comment received 26 likes, while the second received 28 likes, demonstrating the divide within the group between Sanders supporters who disagree with the use of sexist criticisms and those who feel that Clinton’s actions make her undeserving of any defense.

Another iteration of this meme featured a close-up on Clinton’s face with the text “Stupid, orange Trumpses. We wants it, we needs it. Must have the precious. They stole it from us” (Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 18 November 2016). The meme’s caption related, “Hilary [sic] Ain’t looking too good, her first appearance since the election” (Commenter L, 2016). The meme conveys a dual message about Clinton. The image and the caption commented on Clinton’s appearance in a derogatory manner, as does the comparison between Clinton and the character Gollum from the Lord of the Rings, from whom the text over the image is derived. In the Lord of the Rings, Gollum believes himself to be the rightful owner of the ring; the comparison here is that Clinton is portrayed as believing herself to be the rightful recipient of the presidency.

The majority of the 26 comments on this image seemed to support the original poster’s message. Some users remarked negatively about Clinton’s appearance, leaving comments such as “That moment when Trump wears more makeup than Hillary” (Commenter M, 2016) and “Those bags under her eyes could make Coach jealous” (Commenter N, 2016). Other commenters continued the meme’s theme of referencing sinister characters from popular culture, likening Clinton to a zombie on AMC’s The Walking Dead (Commenter O, 2016) and villains from Star Wars (Commenter P, 2016).
Other users opposed the meme because they felt that the meme was more representative of “Trump/Clinton bullshit” (Commenter Q, 2016) or that the page itself was becoming “dangerously pro-Trump” (Commenter R, 2016). One user protested the meme as counter to Sanders’ message, asking “How can you even claim to support Bernie when you trash his peaceful, loving and feminist rhetoric by being sexist?” (Commenter S, 2016). Again, criticism of the meme’s sexist content was justified by other group members, who argued that Clinton’s actions make her deserving of any criticism she might receive.

**Elf on a Shelf.** The “Elf on a Shelf” meme originated with the children’s book *Elf on the Shelf: A Christmas Tradition*, whose protagonist was an elf who reports children’s behavior to Santa. The meme began with the Facebook page “Elf on a Shelf Gone Bad,” in which the Elf on the Shelf doll was positioned in a variety of menacing and sexual poses. The meme continued to evolve, with Tumblr user fuckin-rockets developing the first version of the meme that featured the phrase “You’ve heard of Elf on the Shelf, now get ready for…” on December 3, 2016. Fuckin-rockets’ version of the meme featured a photo with an Ash Ketchum doll in a garbage can, implying the rhyme “Ash in the Trash” (“Elf on the Shelf,” 2017). The current iteration of the meme follows a similar rhyme scheme, the language of which (in this specific example) is problematically sexist.

This version of the “Elf on a Shelf” meme features the Democratic presidential candidate on a rolled marijuana cigarette, called a “blunt” (Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 18 September 2017). The text above matches that of fuckin-rockets’ version of the meme, signaling to readers that the photo below will imply a rhyme. In this case, the implied rhyme is “cunt on a blunt,” an insulting term for female genitalia and a form of “gendered hate speech” (Shubber, 2014).

This meme garnered a total of 373 comments. Many comments, such as the comment left by Commenter A (2017), simply remarked that the user did not understand the meme, or featured the user repeating the phrase “Cunt on a blunt” to show that the user understood the joke. However, more than 20 users raised issues with the meme’s use of the word “cunt” to criticize Clinton. These remarks ranged from “that’s rude” (Commenter B, 2017) to more specific criticisms such as “if you’re gonna [sic] try to drag her try dragging her policies. Using misogyny just makes you look dumb” (Commenter C, 2017). Commenters D (2017) and E (2017) expressed their disappointment that Bernie supporters would use such offensive language, while others suggested that the people who approved of the meme were not “real Bernie supporters” (Commenter F, 2017) or were maybe even the “alt right…trolling this page again” (Commenter G, 2017). Facebook users such as Commenter H (2017) demonstrated awareness of the far-reaching consequences of posting sexist content, commenting “Y’all post this shit then wonder why Bernie supporters were label [sic] sexist during the campaign.” Thus, some
members of BSDMS demonstrated an awareness not only that sexism is not acceptable, but also that sexism can hurt the cause they, as a group, claim to support.

However, following the majority of comments denouncing the sexism of the meme, other users commented to argue. Many of the arguments took the position that calling a woman a “cunt” is “no different than calling a man a dick” (Commenter I, 2017) or implied that those offended by the meme’s use of profanity needed to understand that “it’s just a joke” (Commenter J, 2017). Others argued that, since Clinton “alienated the whole Bernie movement” the term was appropriate (Commenter K, 2017). It is apparent that, while sexist memes are not unanimously supported by the group, BSDMS is far from united against sexist critiques used in a humorous way or against a candidate for whom they have little respect.

Implied Sexism

In addition to memes that overtly referenced sexist language or criticized Clinton’s physical appearance and personal relationships, there were several memes with content that critiqued Clinton’s cultural knowledge and relevance. While these memes, most notably the “Bernie or Hillary” election poster meme, did not focus explicitly on Clinton as a female, their message still implied that women in general are less likely to be knowledgeable about music and Internet culture than males. This trend is also evident, as explained above, in the “Idiot Nerd Girl” meme, which is arguably the predecessor of the “Bernie or Hillary” meme.

Bernie or Hillary. One successful meme repeatedly noted for its sexist content during the 2016 primary was the Bernie vs. Hillary meme, which mimicked the style of a campaign poster, stating “Bernie or Hillary? Be informed. Compare them on the issues that really matter” (Hess, 2016a). The meme was originally posted on Reddit by user Obvious Plant, but quickly grew in popularity (Rouner, 2016). While the meme’s contributors argued that the meme is intended to convey the impression that “Bernie [knows] what he’s talking about…while Hillary is out of touch and flip flops” (Hess, 2016a), the meme’s frequent use of pop culture content (featuring such topics as “Star Wars” and “Dr. Dre”) makes the meme more similar to the sexist “Idiot Nerd Girl” meme (Rouner, 2016). Both memes make use of the trope of a “giggling…woman unable to master technology or understand anything outside of soap operas and romance novels” (Rouner, 2016).

The “Bernie or Hillary” iterations listing issues related to music or popular Internet culture seem to indicate that Clinton, as a woman, is incapable of proficiency in male-dominated industries. BSDMS members did not seem to object to this meme, unlike those they contested that levied explicitly sexist criticism, resulting in the production and dissemination of hundreds of versions of this meme. One such example, which focuses on the issue of song lyrics “1, 2, 3 and to the four,” featured Sanders responding easily with the end of the lyric “Snoop doggy dogg and Dr. Dre is at the door,” while Clinton merely continued counting consecutively (Bernie
Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 3 February 2017). The BSDMS members voiced their approval of the meme; out of 46 comments not a single user argued against the meme’s implicitly sexist message. One member commented to ask “why?” (Commenter Y, 2017), and was summarily informed by another member that “Bernie is hip and cool, duh” (Commenter Z, 2017). Members seemed to be more interested in focusing on the meme’s positive message about Sanders than on the negative message about Clinton.

When BSDMS members did object to this meme, they commented on the meme’s use of humor, rather than its sexist content. For instance, this version of the “Bernie or Hillary” meme concerns the issue “Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash” (Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 19 February 2017)

Again, Sanders is depicted as knowledgeable while Clinton is portrayed as having no understanding of the slang term “dank,” which members use to mean “something of high quality” (“Dank,” 2005). Members did not respond as positively to this version of the meme as they did to the version discussed above. For instance, Commenter AA (2017) remarked that the meme “failed to meet the dank threshold” while another complained that the BSDMS group “sucks” now that “admins never let anything [good] through” (Commenter BB, 2017). However, neither member followed their complaint with an argument against the meme’s implicitly sexist message. Both seemed more concerned with the meme’s perceived lack of humor.

Discussion

Throughout my investigation, a trend emerged of group members attempting to “police” overtly sexist content according to the standards of behavior touted by Sanders. Despite this, other group members attempted to justify sexist language and criticisms by insisting that the memes were primarily jokes and not intended to be taken seriously (Commenter J, 2017). This tactic of excusing sexism is consistent with online culture generally. As Laineste (2013) related, online humor can range from “mild and playful jokes to teasing, satire or verbal attacks. In the latter, humour [sic] is often used as a disclaimer to hide the aggressive intentions of the joke-teller” (p. 32). Thus, the justification of sexist content as humor is not exclusive to the BSDMS community or Sanders supporters, but is instead a prevalent trend online.

Such trends may extend further than user-produced content and comments, however. As Peters, Holmgreen, and Oswald (2015) related, commercial media frequently employs gender role stereotyping, using “socially prescribed expectations to sell products” (p. 160). Advertisers frame these stereotypes as humor in an attempt to avoid criticism, and in doing so perpetuate inequality (Peters, Holmgreen, and Oswald, 2015, p. 160). Sexist humor “provide[s] a venue in which people can more safely express their prejudices” (Peters, Holmgreen, and Oswald, 2015, p. 161) and can have a myriad of negative consequences for women. The BSDMS members’ lack of attention to the implicit sexism of the “Bernie or Hillary” meme may be in part due to the
frequent use of sexism in professionally produced media. The inclusion and acceptance of sexist jokes in mainstream culture makes such content easier to excuse online.

Other users, such as Commenter K (2017), recognized content as harmfully sexist, but argued that Clinton deserved such treatment. Unfortunately, this and similar justifications of hate speech and sexism are also a trend in online behavior. The term for such behavior is “moral disengagement,” in which “[p]eople try to lessen the cognitive dissonance of seeing themselves as decent people who do indecent things by using justification (‘she deserved it’)” (Reagle, 2015a, p. 103). Online commenters will often “dehumanize the target” (Reagle, 2015a, p. 103), as can be seen in the depiction of Clinton as the inhuman Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings* or as a creature subsisting on the blood of infants. Again, this behavior is not specific to BSDMS but is prevalent in online behavior in general.

Additionally, as Commenter G (2017) related, some of the content and comments might have been posted for the intentional purpose of upsetting other members. Commenter G (2017) specifically named the “alt right” as responsible for the trolling, but it is impossible to pinpoint the motivations of trolls, as a troll will send “messages that appear outwardly sincere, that are designed to attract predictable responses or flames, and that consequently waste time by provoking futile arguments” (Reagle, 2015a, p. 96). Thus, it is difficult enough to identify an individual who is “trolling,” without hazarding a guess at his/her motivations.

Trolling, as a practice, often results in the production and dissemination of sexist content. As Reagle (2015a) related, “…trolling still appears to be the province of men” (p. 98). Women are often subjected to “disproportionate abuse and derision online” (Phillips, 2015, p. 167), much of which is related to trollish activity. However, trolls are not the sole creators of sexist content and, in general, online activity is influenced by larger cultural values. As Phillips (2015) related, “trolling behaviors run parallel to a host of culturally accepted logics” (p. 115). While, Phillips (2015) argued, “Trolls may push these logics to their furthest and most grotesque extremes…ultimately trolls’ actions are imbricated in the same cultural systems that constitute the norm” (p. 115). The same can be said for the members of BSDMS who post and support sexist content; while the sexism is harmful, it is reflective of cultural values and norms that devalue women.

**Conclusion**

While this study cannot ascertain the scope of Bernie Bro activity on all platforms, BSDMS – one of the largest and best-known sites for sharing memes relating to Sanders and his opponent Clinton – did not primarily feature sexist content or hate speech. In instances in which overtly sexist memes were posted, this content faced resistance from other members of BSDMS. The comments sections of these memes showcased the divide between BSDMS members who disagreed with the use of sexism under any circumstance and those who followed the larger cultural trend of excusing sexism as humorous or deserved. However, the behaviors of those who supported or excused the sexism are far from unique to Sanders supporters and instead represent the greater culture of the Internet. Furthermore, sexist content and comments cannot reliably be ascribed to genuine Sanders supporters as group membership is open to anyone with a Facebook profile.

In addition, the sexist culture of the Internet is a product of larger cultural norms. Thus, the devaluation of women in American culture and the elevation of the white male must share the
burden of responsibility for online sexism and hate speech. Online culture, and even the actions of trolls, are reflective of both the values and media of mainstream culture. While some of these values may be taken to extremes online, hateful and sexist content stems from the culture into which users are reared and in which they learn that sexism is acceptable if conveyed in jest or somehow justified.
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